Modernism

The Modernist Period in English Literature occupied the years from shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century through roughly 1965. In broad terms, the period was marked by sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Experimentation and individualism became virtues, where in the past they were often heartily discouraged. Modernism was set in motion, in one sense, through a series of cultural shocks. The first of these great shocks was the Great War, which ravaged Europe from 1914 through 1918, known now as World War One. At the time, this “War to End All Wars” was looked upon with such ghastly horror that many people simply could not imagine what the world seemed to be plunging towards. The first hints of that particular way of thinking called Modernism stretch back into the nineteenth century. As literary periods go, Modernism displays a relatively strong sense of cohesion and similarity across genres and locales. Furthermore, writers who adopted the Modern point of view often did so quite deliberately and self-consciously. Indeed, a central preoccupation of Modernism is with the inner self and consciousness. In contrast to the Romantic world view, the Modernist cares rather little for Nature, Being, or the overarching structures of history. Instead of progress and growth, the Modernist intelligentsia sees decay and a growing alienation of the individual. The machinery of modern society is perceived as impersonal, capitalist, and antagonistic to the artistic impulse. War most certainly had a great deal of influence on such ways of approaching the world. Two World Wars in the span of a generation effectively shell-shocked all of Western civilization.

In its genesis, the Modernist Period in English literature was first and foremost a visceral reaction against the Victorian culture and aesthetic, which had prevailed for most of the nineteenth century. Indeed, a break with traditions is one of the fundamental constants of the Modernist stance. Intellectuals and artists at the turn of the twentieth century believed the previous generation’s way of doing things was a cultural dead end. They could foresee that world events were spiraling into unknown territory. The stability and quietude of Victorian civilization were rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was essentially the triggering event of the First World War, a conflict which swept away all preconceived notions about the nature of so-called modern warfare.

In the world of art, generally speaking, Modernism was the beginning of the distinction between “high” art and “low” art. The educational reforms of the Victorian Age had led to a rapid increase in literacy rates, and therefore a greater demand for literature or all sorts. A popular press quickly developed to supply that demand. The sophisticated literati looked upon this new popular literature with scorn. Writers who refused to bow to the popular tastes found themselves in a state of alienation from the mainstream of society. To some extent, this alienation fed into the stereotype of the aloof artist, producing nothing of commercial value for the market. It’s worth mentioning that this alienation worked both ways, as the reading public by and large turned their backs on many “elitist” artists. The academic world became something of a refuge for disaffected artists, as they could rub elbows with fellow disenfranchised intellectuals. Still, the most effective poets and novelists did manage to make profound statements that were absorbed by the whole of society and not just the writer’s inner circles. In the later years of the Modernist period, a form of populism returned to the literary mainstream, as regionalism and identity politics became significant influences on the purpose and direction of artistic endeavor.

The nineteenth century, like the several centuries before it, was a time of privilege for wealthy Caucasian males. Women, minorities, and the poor were marginalized to the point of utter silence and inconsequence. The twentieth century witnessed the beginnings of a new paradigm between first the sexes, and later between different cultural groups. Class distinction remains arguably the most difficult bridge to cross in terms of forming a truly equitable society. Some would argue that class has become a euphemism for race, but that’s another discussion. The point is that as the twentieth century moved forward, a greater variety of literary voices won the struggle to be heard. What had so recently been inconceivable was steadily becoming a reality. African-Americans took part in the Harlem Renaissance, with the likes of Langston Hughes at the forefront of a vibrant new idiom in American poetry. Women like Hilda Doolittle and Amy Lowell became leaders of the Imagist movement. None of this is to suggest that racism and sexism had been completely left behind in the art world. Perhaps such blemishes can never be fully erased, but the strides that were taken in the twentieth century were remarkable by any measure.

In Modernist literature, it was the poets who took fullest advantage of the new spirit of the times, and stretched the possibilities of their craft to lengths not previously imagined. In general, there was a disdain for most of the literary production of the last century. The exceptions to this disdain were the French Symbolist poets like Charles Beaudelaire, and the work of Irishman Gerard Manley Hopkins. The French Symbolists were admired for the sophistication of their imagery. In comparison to much of what was produced in England and America, the French were ahead of their time. They were similarly unafraid to delve into subject matter that had usually been taboo for such a refined art form. Hopkins, for his part, brought a fresh way to look at rhythm and word usage. He more or less invented his own poetic rhythms, just as he coined his own words for things which had, for him, no suitable descriptor. Hopkins had no formal training in poetry, and he never published in his lifetime. This model – the self-taught artist-hermit who has no desire for public adulation – would become synonymous with the poet in the modern age. This stereotype continues unrivaled to this day, despite the fact that the most accomplished poets of the Modern period were far from recluses. Even though alienation was a nearly universal experience for Modernist poets, it was impossible to escape some level of engagement with the world at large. Even if this engagement was mediated through the poetry, the relationship that poets had with their world was very real, and very much revealing of the state of things in the early twentieth century.

Leading up to the First World War, Imagist poetry was dominating the scene, and sweeping previous aesthetic points of view under the rug. The Imagists, among them Ezra Pound, sought to boil language down to its absolute essence. They wanted poetry to concentrate entirely upon “the thing itself,” in the words of critic-poet T. E. Hulme. To achieve that effect required minimalist language, a lessening of structural rules and a kind of directness that Victorian and Romantic poetry seriously lacked. Dreaminess or Pastoral poetry were utterly abandoned in favor of this new, cold, some might say mechanized poetics. Imagist poetry was almost always short, unrhymed, and noticeably sparse in terms of adjectives and adverbs. At some points, the line between poetry and natural language became blurred. This was a sharp departure from the ornamental, verbose style of the Victorian era. Gone also were the preoccupations with beauty and nature. Potential subjects for poetry were now limitless, and poets took full advantage of this new freedom.

No Modernist poet has garnered more praise and attention than Thomas Stearns Eliot. Born in Missouri, T. S. Eliot would eventually settle in England, where he would produce some of the greatest poetry and criticism of the last century. Eliot picked up where the Imagists left off, while adding some of his own peculiar aesthetics to the mix. His principal contribution to twentieth century verse was a return to highly intellectual, allusive poetry. He looked backwards for inspiration, but he was not nostalgic or romantic about the past. Eliot’s productions were entirely in the modern style, even if his blueprints were seventeenth century metaphysical poets. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Eliot’s work is the manner in which he seamlessly moves from very high, formal verse into a more conversational and easy style. Yet even when his poetic voice sounds very colloquial, there is a current underneath, which hides secondary meanings. It is this layering of meanings and contrasting of styles that mark Modernist poetry in general and T. S. Eliot in particular. It is no overstatement to say that Eliot was the pioneer of the ironic mode in poetry; that is, deceptive appearances hiding difficult truths.

In American Literature, the group of writers and thinkers known as the Lost Generation has become synonymous with Modernism. In the wake of the First World War, several American artists chose to live abroad as they pursued their creative impulses. These included the intellectual Gertrude Stein, the novelists Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the painter Waldo Pierce, among others. The term itself refers to the spiritual and existential hangover left by four years of unimaginably destructive warfare. The artists of the Lost Generation struggled to find some meaning in the world in the wake of chaos. As with much of Modernist literature, this was achieved by turning the mind’s eye inward and attempting to record the workings of consciousness. For Hemingway, this meant the abandonment of all ornamental language. His novels are famous for their extremely spare, blunt, simple sentences and emotions that play out right on the surface of things. There is an irony to this bluntness, however, as his characters often have hidden agendas, hidden sometimes even from themselves, which serve to guide their actions. The Lost Generation, like other “High Modernists,” gave up on the idea that anything was truly knowable. All truth became relative, conditional, and in flux. The War demonstrated that no guiding spirit rules the events of the world, and that absolute destruction was kept in check by only the tiniest of margins.

The novel was by no means immune from the self-conscious, reflective impulses of the new century. Modernism introduced a new kind of narration to the novel, one that would fundamentally change the entire essence of novel writing. The “unreliable” narrator supplanted the omniscient, trustworthy narrator of preceding centuries, and readers were forced to question even the most basic assumptions about how the novel should operate. James Joyce’s [*Ulysses*](http://www.online-literature.com/james_joyce/ulysses/) is the prime example of a novel whose events are really the happenings of the mind, the goal of which is to translate as well as possible the strange pathways of human consciousness. A whole new perspective came into being known as “stream of consciousness.” Rather than looking out into the world, the great novelists of the early twentieth century surveyed the inner space of the human mind. At the same time, the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud had come into mainstream acceptance. These two forces worked together to alter people’s basic understanding of what constituted truth and reality.

Experimentation with genre and form was yet another defining characteristic of Modernist literature. Perhaps the most representative example of this experimental mode is T. S. Eliot’s long poem [*The Waste Land*](http://www.online-literature.com/ts-eliot/2120/). Literary critics often single out *The Waste Land* as the definitive sample of Modernist literature. In it, one is confronted by biblical-sounding verse forms, quasi-conversational interludes, dense and frequent references which frustrate even the most well-read readers, and sections that resemble prose more than poetry. At the same time, Eliot fully displays all the conventions which one expects in Modernist literature. There is the occupation with self and inwardness, the loss of traditional structures to buttress the ego against shocking realities, and a fluid nature to truth and knowledge.

The cynicism and alienation of the first flowering of Modernist literature could not persist. By mid-century, indeed by the Second World War, there was already a strong reaction against the pretentions of the Moderns. Artists of this newer generation pursued a more democratic, pluralistic mode for poetry and the novel. There was optimism for the first time in a long time. Commercialism, publicity, and the popular audience were finally embraced, not shunned. Alienation became boring. True, the influence of Modernist literature continues to be quite astonishing. The Modern poet-critics changed the way people think about artists and creative pursuits. The Modern novelists changed the way many people perceive truth and reality. These changes are indeed profound, and cannot easily be replaced by new schemas.

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**Major Modernist Writers**

* Bishop, Elizabeth (1911-1979)
* [Conrad, Joseph (1857-1924)](http://www.online-literature.com/conrad/)
* Doolittle, Hilda (1886-1961)
* [Eliot, Thomas Stearns (1888-1965)](http://www.online-literature.com/ts-eliot/)
* Faulkner, William (1897-1962)
* [Fitzgerald, F. Scott (1896-1940)](http://www.online-literature.com/fitzgerald/)
* Hemingway, Ernest (1899-1961)
* Hughes, Langston (1902-1967)
* [James, Henry (1843-1916)](http://www.online-literature.com/henry_james/)
* [Lawrence, D. H. (1885-1930)](http://www.online-literature.com/dh_lawrence/)
* Lowell, Amy (1874-1925)
* Pound, Ezra (1885-1972)
* [Shaw, George Bernard (1856-1950)](http://www.online-literature.com/george_bernard_shaw/)
* Stevens, Wallace (1879-1955)
* Williams, Tennessee (1882-1941)
* [Woolf, Virginia (1882-1941)](http://www.online-literature.com/virginia_woolf/)
* [Yeats, William Butler (1865-1939)](http://www.online-literature.com/yeats/)

[**Periods & History Home**](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/)

* Literary Periods
  + [Renaissance Literature](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/renaissance.php)
  + [The Enlightenment](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/enlightenment.php)
  + [Romanticism](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/romanticism.php)
  + [Transcendentalism](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/transcendentalism.php)
  + [Victorian Literature](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/victorian.php)
  + [Realism](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/realism.php)
  + [Naturalism](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/naturalism.php)
  + [Modernism](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/modernism.php)
  + [Bloomsbury Group](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/bloomsbury.php)
  + [Existentialism](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/existentialism.php)
  + [Beat Generation](http://www.online-literature.com/periods/beat.php)
* English Literature History
  + [From the Conquest to Chaucer 1066-1400](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/1/)
  + [From Chaucer to Spenser 1400-1599](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/2/)
  + [The Age of Shakespeare 1564-1616](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/3/)
  + [The Age of Milton 1608-1674](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/4/)
  + [From the Restoration to the Death of Pope 1660-1744](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/5/)
  + [The Death of Pope to the French Revolution 1744-1789](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/6/)
  + [The French Revolution to the Death of Scott 1789-1832](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/7/)
  + [From the Death of Scott to the Present Time 1832-1893](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/8/)
  + [Appendix](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/from-chaucer-to-tennyson/9/)
* American Literature History
  + [Preface](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/0/)
  + [The Colonial Period 1607-1765](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/1/)
  + [The Revolutionary Period 1765-1815](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/2/)
  + [The Era of National Expansion 1815-1837](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/3/)
  + [The Concord Writers 1837-1861](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/4/)
  + [The Cambridge Scholars 1837-1861](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/5/)
  + [Literature in the Cities 1837-1861](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/6/)
  + [Literature Since 1861](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/7/)
  + [Appendix](http://www.online-literature.com/henry-augustin-beers/studies-american-letters/8/)